The Slovenian Folk and Literary Ballad

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For European folklorists, the definition of the term “ballad” has been more or less fixed since 1966, when it was codified by researchers in Freiburg as a narrative song with dramatic emphasis, irrespective of the ending, tragic or otherwise (Kumer 1998: 31). One always has this technical meaning in mind when using the word, though it is not generally used by traditional singers themselves (Brown 1998: 47–48). Numerous, roughly equivalent terms exist throughout Europe, of course, the most widely used being “narrative song” (Erzähl lied in German, ballade in French, balada or pripovedna pesem in Slovenian). Others include “women’s songs” (Croatian), žalostne, “sad,” or stare, “old,” songs (Slovenian); stolka (Russian); dumy (Ukrainian); vise (Scandinavian); and romance (Spanish). Nevertheless, ballad has been accepted as the preferred term for professional, international use through its adoption in German folklore studies and the defining canons from northern Europe, particularly those of England, Scotland, and Scandinavia (Kumer 1976: 131). Research has shown that the narrative songs of other European nations do not completely comply with this type, however.

In Slovenia, ballad came to be used in literary historical studies for shorter narrative songs about unusual, dramatically tense, sometimes-terrifying events from the world of fairy tales, myths, history, and also modern times, where epic components are linked with dramatic and lyrical ones. Some ballads may also, therefore, be lyrics (Kos 1987: 173–74). Slovenian literary practice also began to differentiate between the folk romance and the ballad, following the model of literary poetry, though it is well known that, in Spanish tradition, “romance” applies to a shorter epic/lyric song of Spanish origin, similar to the ballad in motifs and themes but different in spirit, mood, style, and composition and with a particular verse form. Slovenian academics have therefore classified some folk ballads as romances, rather than true ballads, by analogy with the more-cheerful, less-tragic literary romances, “Kralj Matjaž” [King Mathias] and “Pegam and Lambergar” (Kos 1996: 269–70), for example. In contrast with the literary ballad, whose emphasis is mainly on content, the folk ballad concentrates on narration. The criteria on which we classify a song as a ballad should therefore be its level of drama. In comparison to the epic song, the ballad is shorter, its narration is more condensed, and the level of drama is intensified so that dialogue is foregrounded. There are more than three hundred types of narrative song in Slovenian tradition, with ballads the most numerous.
In Slovenia, the term “folk ballad” is defined very differently in academic and literary tradition, resulting in confusion when discussing ballads in relation to folk and literary poetry. A typical heroic, narrative song such as “Pegam and Lambergar” is thus, according to literary historians, a romance because of its light nature and description of the time of the knights, while according to folklorists, it is a typical heroic narrative song or ballad (Kos 1979: 70).

Literary historians have used the term ballad to describe similar structured narrative folk songs—“Desetnica” [The Tenth Daughter], “Rošlin and Verjanko,” and so on—which has had a powerful influence on the subsequent development of the ballad in Slovenian art literature. Within the literary establishment, a ballad is an exclusively tragic song, gloomy and dramatic; all songs without such endings are called romances. Accordingly, the typically balladic “Godec pred peklom” [The Fiddler outside Hell] should be called a romance and not a ballad, which is absurd. It is equally ridiculous to classify “Kralj Matjaž” [King Mathias] or “Zvesta deklica” [The Faithful Girl] as romances solely because they end happily. Slovenian folklore studies, led by Zmaga Kumer, therefore use the more generally applicable term “narrative song,” thereby including romances and avoiding taxonomic confusion.

Folklorists maintain that the term ballad, in its meaning of narrative song, was brought into art literature by Bürger in Lenore [Lenora] in 1770. This became the role model for the static, literary ballad of Enlightenment writers throughout Europe, who enthusiastically translated the German pre-Romantic ballads of Bürger, Goethe, and Schiller.

The pioneer of the literary ballad in Slovenia was our national poet, France Prešeren, who translated Lenore in the nineteenth century (Kos 1979: 131). Soon after, he wrote the first Slovenian literary ballad, “Povodni mož” [The Water Man], which, like Bürger’s poem, was also modeled on a folk tradition about a proud girl from Ljubljana who rejected all dancing partners except one; he turned out to be a river man who swept her into the currents of the Ljubljanica. Prešeren probably based the poem on a written report by the polymath Valvazor, which tells of the abduction of Urška Šefer during a dance under the linden tree in Stari Trg (the Old Market) in Ljubljana, but a folk ballad about the water man already existed, “Hudič odnese plesalko” [The Devil Carries Off the Dancer]. We may assume that Prešeren was familiar with the song, which describes a similar event, but the reason the dancer was spirited away by the devil was because the sign of the cross was not made before the dance began (SLP 1, no. 25; Š 1, nos. 82, 83b; this ballad is supposed to be originally Slovenian’). Prešeren presumably also knew of another song, “The Water Man” (SLP 24; Š 1, nos. 81, 89; Kumer et al.
1970: 143–46), which was familiar in Germany as well (“Wassermanns Braut”), though it was confined to the west of the Elbe and Saale Rivers, the area of the Old Slavs. It is also known in Croatia (HNP 5, no. 111), but there the girl is abducted by a dragon instead of the water man. So, even in the earliest period of the Slovenian literary ballad, clear connections with folk ballads existed.

Prešeren was also engaged in the poetic reworking of folk songs, medieval ballads in particular. *Lenore*, of course, already had its folk version, “Mrtvec pride po ljubico” [The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover]. Bürger himself drew on the folk motif, so it may be said that the literary version of the ballad reflects the romantic tendencies of the time to delve into the folkloric, original, and popular. The same holds true for Prešeren’s poem, which became popular with the public; it was set to music, and singers embraced it as their own, though this was probably due to the influence of schools. The Slovenian archives contain three versions of this ballad (twenty-five out of thirty-six stanzas). Since the poem was long and hard to understand, the story was not amenable to the folk process of condensation and fragmentation and therefore did not spread as widely as the more-concise folk ballad “The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover,” which exists in the archives in several tens of versions, the last recorded in 1982 in Dolenjska.

The differences between the folk and the literary versions are obvious. The folk version consists of condensed narration, dramatic story, lyrical elements, and a refrain which is not gloomy, perhaps even cheerful. A folk singer would therefore have no reservations about using a cheerful melody. Most singers probably learned the literary “Lenora” in school; its melody belongs to a semifolkloric creation of the modern period. A similar tune can be heard in several semifolkloric, religious songs (particularly Christmas carols and those with eight-line stanzas (Kumer et al. 1970: 327). The literary reworkings are only discernable in some variants; the literary text became shorter until it was completely replaced by the folk version, sung even today and certainly more well known than Prešeren’s. These ballads represent the beginning of the so-called series of folk/literary ballads, which intertwine elements of the two (see figures overleaf).
“Lenore,” and the folk song “The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover,” are associated with a number of Slovenian literary authors, who have established new semantic and formal relationships with the theme.

The subject, which draws on the idea that the dead cannot rest peacefully in their grave if their relatives mourn them excessively, and that the dead person therefore returns and takes the mourner with him, has its roots in mythology. This subject is preserved as the memory of the old family custom that a wife is not allowed to outlive her husband; this custom is believed to have been first recorded in the early twelfth century in the Hindu collection *Vétala’s Twenty-Five Tales*. The idea has survived throughout the centuries and has been reflected in works by all Indo-European nations, sometimes in poetic creations and sometimes in prose. Nations have changed its content according to their own individualities; on the basis of this, we are justified in talking about the Germanic, Roman, and Slavic Lenore (Trdina 1938: 125).

The story itself is incorporated into both poetry and prose as part of the folk-literary tradition across Europe (AT 365) in the motif of a dead rider who appears
in a series of ballads where the dead person returns and takes away his wife, child, or lover. (Examples include the Greek “Constantine and Arete” or “The Dead Brother’s Return,” the English “The Suffolk Miracle” (Child 272), and the Scottish “Sweet William’s Ghost” (Child 77) (Leach 1949: 108, Harmon 1949: 299).

Let us now examine a series of texts derived from two different treatments of the same subject—“The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover” and the translation, or poetic recreation, of Bürger’s Lenore—one a folk ballad, the other a literary creation. The latter’s popularity in tradition is not difficult to fathom because it tells the same story using the same metric and rhythmic patterns as the folk ballad, but through investigating intertextual relationships and transformations of motif and character, we may also explore issues of meaning and social function. In addition, while the print-based literary ballad keeps changing, the literary ballad in oral tradition has remained relatively static, a reminder of the active nature of the relationship (Golež Kaučič 1993: 168).

“Lenora,” or “The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover,” has come to us through different literary poems at different times; as a result, its original meaning has been enlarged as it has evolved. The comparative texts presented here are part of a series of independent variants, based on the same motif and category, which have changed their genre and central idea during different literary/historical periods. Though its language has changed considerably, the content and genre of the folk ballad has been very stable. In fact, though it has been in oral tradition for many generations, the folk ballad has, paradoxically, changed much less than the literary ballad, with the result that stable versions still exist today in certain places. Conversely, no version of Prešeren’s deliberately innovative “Lenore” has been found in oral tradition since 1965.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mrtvec pride po ljubico</th>
<th>The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Po vrtu je špancirala</td>
<td>She wandered around the garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hojladrija, hojladrija,</td>
<td>hojladrija, hojladrija,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in drobne rožce zbirala,</td>
<td>and picking small flowers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hojladrija, drija drom.</td>
<td>drija drom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Po pušelc bom pa res pršu</td>
<td>“I will come for a bouquet.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>če živ ne bom, bom pa mrtu.”</td>
<td>if I am alive, I will be dead.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Urca enajst je udarila</td>
<td>The clock struck eleven,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anzelj na okno potrklja.</td>
<td>Anzelj knocked on the window.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*She asks him first whether he would come for a bouquet if he were alive or dead. The singer left out this stanza.
4. “Oh Micka, al si ti doma,
da bodeš z mano rajžala?”
“Oh Micka, are you home
to travel with me?”

5. Urno na konja jo položi
in hitro hitro v noč zbeži.
He swiftly placed her on the horse
and quickly disappeared into the night.

6. “Oj Micka, al te je kaj strah?”
“Oj kaj bo, kaj bo mene strah!”
“Oh Micka, are you afraid?”
“Well, what is fear to me!”

7. Ko pa do britofa prideta
hiter gor zajašeta.
When they drew near to the cemetery,
they quickly mounted.

8. En grob se urno odvali,
Anzelj se vanjga položi.
A grave swiftly opened,
Anzelj lay down inside.

9. Micka je dol se zgrudila
in svojo dušo zdhnila.
Micka collapsed to the ground,
and her soul sighed.

10. Naša, naša luba Gospa
le prosi ti za rajnca dva.
Our dear Lady,
we only pray to you for two deceased.

In its variants, the story of “Lenore,” or “The Dead Man Comes to Get His Lover,” has been reduced due to the challenges of memory. The story has become denser, while individual details have been lost. “The Dead Man” and “Lenore” have merged into a single central motif which is tapped by poets. So the series of ballads that begin with a folk ballad (Š 1, no. 61A) and Prešeren’s “Lenore” (1830), on which the popular ballad “The Dead Man” (SLP 1, no. 60) is based, is simply a continuation of a trend of artistic recreation, drawing on diverse aspects of content and style.

The first ballad to follow Prešeren’s lead is Simon Jenko’s “Knezov zet” [The Duke’s Son-In-Law] (published 1860), a transformation of the folk ballad “Graščakov vrtmar” [The Gardener of the Lord of the Castle] combined with the motif of the dead man who comes to get his lover. The central theme is social inequality, which condemns the love between the duke’s daughter and a gardener; this merges with the power of love, since that is what enables the girl to raise her beloved, executed by the duke, from his death dwelling. The story goes through a number of deviations, inversions, stylizations, and a complete transformation of genre and content.
Next is Anton Aškerc’s “Vojakova nevesta” [The Soldier’s Bride] (1890), featuring the central motif of a soldier returning to get his lover. The poet merged the method of storytelling in folk songs with the central part of Bürger’s Lenore.

The third poem is “Lenorina pesem” [Lenore’s Song] (1963) by Gregor Strniša. In four four-line assonant stanzas, Strniša creates a ballad mood, while with a single syntagma—“he’s coming from the black soil riding a horse”—he conveys the essence of the story, a poetic attempt to interrelate love and death in the cosmos.

The fourth is a poem written by Svetlana Makarovič: “Lenora” (1972). An intense lyricism is also present in this poem; the first verse immediately transfers us to the dark world of the afterlife:

When the moon rises above the mountain,
The graves open,
And my beloved will come to me,
To make me feel even sadder.

The fifth poem, also by Gregor Strniša, is called “Želod” [Acorn] (1972).

The great dead man rides
Armoured from his grave.

This formal structure combines the assonant characteristic of the older Slovenian folk ballad with the four-line stanzas characteristic of folk love songs. Strniša uses the ballad to elevate the dead man into the cosmos, where the poet is no longer limited by space or time or confined to tragic love between two people; rather, the poem switches between day and night, and life and death.

The fifth author is Franci Zagoričnik, whose “Sveder” [Drill] (1983) is written in pure blank verse; the only similarity with Lenore is the so-called ballad mood and the heroine’s name. On the other hand, Milan Vincetič develops his “Lenora” in seven variants in assonantal four-line stanzas (1988). He uses the motif of Lenore to create a song about seven nights the dead man spends with his (living?) lover in his grave.

This series of texts demonstrates an alteration of genres in the direction of genuine ballad structure; lyric and epic elements blend with dramatic ones. Strniša, Makarovič, and Vincetič, for example, use only ballad mood, whereas Zagoričnik’s works are ballads in name only, the genre being evoked by the title (Golež Kaučič 1993: 170–79). While the poems, structurally speaking, are not genuine ballads,
they nevertheless contain concealed dramatic and epic elements. Each is reminiscient of the folk ballad’s nature and motifs and thus awakens half-forgotten meanings by analogy. The texts, therefore, represent a cultural shift and the recreation of meaning using traditional themes (Juvan 1990: 30).

The Slovenian literary ballad is an individual’s intimate and deliberate creation. It often evokes folk balladry but remains a literary invention with its own particular niche in literary history. Though derived from the traditional form, it soon becomes a hybrid where two distinct poetic forms merge, as we have seen in the Lenore texts. Under the high-cultural surface, the folk ballad suffuses the literary ballad, providing important parallel developments of themes.

There are, however, a few more features which separate the folk ballad from the literary one. The folk ballad is dense and concise, melodic; it is sung mostly as a part song, frequently by individual female singers; in addition, it plays a particular role in people’s lives, offering an opportunity to sing while working together or protecting or watching over the dead. Group work—the wine harvest, weeding, husking, spinning, shelling peas, for instance—was always accompanied by singing, which included ballads. And since, in Slovenia, folk songs were performed collectively, everybody took part in the singing as long as they knew the words and the melody, a fact which has contributed to the preservation and popularization of the genre as a whole. Some parts of Slovenia continue to practice the custom that, until the funeral, the corpse lies at home on a bier, where relatives and friends gather to sing, giving the ballad an additional dimension as a lament. This custom, too, has no doubt assisted in preserving some ballads. (This category includes ballads on the death of the bride on her wedding day, the widower with his child at his wife’s grave, the doomed soul, and the death of a girl who marries far from home.)

The ballad can also be a ritual song: from the Karst region, we have the “Three Magi” carol, whose central part is the ballad of “Marija in brodnik” [Mary and the Ferryman]. It can also be a lullaby, such as “The Ballad of the Maid,” where a servant’s child is murdered by the wife of the lord of the castle. The ballad has also been preserved as a dance song in Bela Krajina in southern Slovenia, where on 27 December each year the local population organizes a winter bonfire and dance the kolo, a kind of round dance, and sings a fairy-tale ballad about a shepherd whose heart was torn out of his chest by three witches (his mother, sister, and lover) while he was sleeping. The dance step can be compared to the Faroe Islands ballad dance. It used to be strictly ritual, but today it is part of the program performed by the Predgrad folklore group.
In terms of thematic content, folk ballads do not differ substantially from their literary counterparts. Love and family ballads prevail, followed by legendary and mythological ones, while social, heroic, and jocular examples are fewer. Poets from the nineteenth century mostly dealt with historical, heroic, and love themes, while contemporary poets have created ballads according to their own individual tastes, with the exception of poems which draw on folk ballads. In these cases, the poets create a double poetic layer, reflecting both folk meanings and their own ideas. Folk ballads can be described as largely characterized by moral themes whereby folk justice demands punishment for any bad deed committed. People understand and forgive human weaknesses, but they do not forgive social sins—refusal of hospitality, vanity, infidelity, hard-heartedness, oppression of the poor, fraud, and the like. The folk ballad also differs from its literary cousin because it is sung very rhythmically and rarely recited. The most common types of verse are the lyrical decasyllabic, three-part octosyllabic, trochaic septisyllabic, two-part octosyllabic, and octosyllabic and septisyllabic distichs. This type of ballad often has a chorus, while older ones lack even rhyme. Harmonic singing, so characteristic of Slovenian folk song in general, also appears in ballads, which may be sung in two or three parts by women, and mostly in three parts by men with the lead vocal in the middle (Kumer 1976: 132–47).

The folk ballad is a closely-packed narrative song, sometimes with a stressed dramatic and dialogic structure. Slovenia’s literary ballad tradition, first emerging in France Prešeren’s nineteenth-century work, has naturally varied in popularity, reaching its peak in contemporary creations that have often destroyed its classic form. We must distinguish between the literary ballad based on folk tradition and the one which has no connection with it whatsoever. By comparing texts, we have seen how literary ballads incorporate content and sometimes even the form of the folk ballad, while adding contemporary meanings and ideas, in the process changing the method of narration. Contemporary works are often ballads which retain folk motifs and verse patterns, thereby functioning as palimpsests. These are the easiest to identify the relationships between folk and literary elements. Throughout all literary periods, the Slovenian folk ballad has had mixed fortune, undergoing reinvention while often preserving its fundamental form, which is alive among traditional singers even today.
Notes
1. ‘SLP’ and ‘Š’ refer to the standard reference works on Slovenian ballads: *Slovenske ljudske pesmi* (Kumer et al. 1970) and *Slovenske narodne pesmi* (Štrekelj 1898-1923).

References


